

ALEXANDERWOHL WORSHIP SERVICE JUNE 28, 2020

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

Great IS your faithfulness to us, O God, as we have just sung. We are grateful for your love and grace, your mercy and steadfastness. You ARE our rock and our redeemer, our refuge and provider. Thank you, God, for your presence and guidance through your Holy Spirit, for your presence that we can know through one another as we care for one another and listen and talk together.

Loving God, these are strange and difficult times – we've heard and used the word "unprecedented" many times. Even so, we trust that you see and know and understand what's happening, even if we don't. We trust that you know the hearts of humanity, you know what's motivating people to think and speak and act, even if we don't. And because we trust in your divine, creative, all-knowing presence, we can ultimately trust in the promise of your love and care.

At the same time, God, we hold the knowledge that you have shown us, your people, what is good. We KNOW what you ask of us – what you REQUIRE of us. To do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with you. To seek first your kingdom. To love you, our God, with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. To love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Hear us as we repent, God. As we turn back to you and acknowledge that we spend more time listening to the news than we do listening to your still, small voice. We are your people, God. We want to live by your commands and follow Jesus faithfully. Help us to align our will with your will. Guide us as we make decisions, as we consider what's happening in our lives and in the world. Center us on Jesus as we navigate the deep waters of these days. Give us courage as we live and move and speak as Jesus would have us do.

Oh God, we pray especially for those whose loneliness and sadness continues and gets deeper as this time of coronavirus goes on. Send your Spirit to them. Send your people – with messages of love and hope; let them know that they are not alone. In this bountiful season of harvest, we are grateful for your bounty and goodness. We ask, God, for safety also, for farmers, for children who are happy to be outdoors playing, riding their bicycles... watch over your people. We pray for Amanda and Kelcey Church and their children Braxton and Natalie. We thank you for their grit and faithfulness as they continue to face serious and difficult medical decisions. Be especially with young Braxton as he heads into surgery and on-going procedures. Hold them safely as they travel and work with the doctors. Grant them wisdom and your peace. We continue to pray, Lord God, for leaders – the leaders of congregations, of cities, we pray for leaders at the state and national levels, we pray for leaders of local organizations and world-wide organizations. We pray for those who are in positions of power. Send your Spirit of fierce love to overcome and lead in their decision-making.

And now we pray together, as Jesus taught his disciples... Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO FAITH SHARING – CALEB YODER

James 4:13-17

For this worship service, I invited faith sharing from several members. Megan Duerksen, Delbert Peters, and my wife will all share how the pandemic impacted them and insights that they've found through this. They talk about noticing nature, watching the unfolding of spring, a slower pace of life, and generosity. I'll give some words of introduction before they begin.

Though I don't think of God as the author of the pandemic, I do believe that Spirit is constantly eager to teach us, and so often we have things out of our control to be receptive to the Spirit's voice.

More than anything else when we think about the pandemic, we think about sudden changes of plans, even throwing out the calendar completely. I thought about passages in scripture that speak to changes of plans. One of the most striking passages, with strong language is this one Marilyn read from James.

This short passage is found within a sequence that addresses sins of arrogance. It begins with the arrogance of slander or judging others, then that of boasting of one's plans (the part that we heard), then oppressing and taking advantage of the poor. The language crescendos as James moves to greater and greater sins.

Of course, I didn't mean this as a rebuke of anyone at all. You might be wondering: what's so wrong with making plans? Well, nothing really. It's the attitude that can be behind them.

James is talking about merchants and traders who make plans to travel to a city to sell their wares. They are already wealthy and boast in their plans to gain more wealth. But no one is above the human condition.

In Central America, and I imagine many other parts of the world, it is common to talk about your plans, even trivial plans by adding phrases like "if God wills it." You wouldn't just say, "I'll see you next week," but "If God wants it, I'll see you next week." These kinds of phrases are used by everyone, even people who aren't particularly religious.

It's a cultural practice, and probably an often-unthinking reflex, but the habitual ways we use language still shape us. Central Americans, especially those without a lot of money, know very well all kinds of things can go wrong, so they learn to hold plans lightly.

Preparing wisely for the future is praised in the Bible, but our culture is often obsessed with control, self-interest, and self-diversion. I once asked a Chilean couple I know what was the Chilean impression of Americans, and they answered that Americans are people who think they are in control and are super uptight about their plans. Our culture is an arrogant culture, and maybe as new cases begin to spike in many places our national arrogance is being chastened.

James is concerned with more than just employing adding "God willing" to everything you say. He challenges our view of the world as one with limited resources that we exploit and control to our own advantage, and instead a world that God has supplied with all we need to live our lives and even prosper if we only learn to live in cooperation rather than looking for self-advantage. James also reminds us that failure to pursue the good is as sinful as harmful behavior.

So I've said enough. I'll let Megan, Delbert, and Beth each share different perspectives on what this unusual time has to teach us.

MEGAN DUERKSEN

I left school on Friday, March 13, excited to begin spring break, but I could also feel worry about Covid-19 creeping into the back of my mind. The remainder of the state basketball tournament had just been cancelled, which, at the time, was astonishing! But there was this sense that even more cancellations were to come. I didn't know that would be the last day of school as we knew it for this year. I will never forget just a few days later when Caiden exploded out of the house yelling that school had been cancelled for the rest of the year! As a parent, I was stunned. As a teacher, I was terrified! The first thoughts swirling around in my head were:

I won't teach again this year?

My own kids won't learn anything more this year?

What about the golf season?

Piano lessons?

No more Field trips?

Will there be 8th grade promotion?

I've come so far with my 6th and 7th graders but I had so much more to teach them!

And finally - Wait - I can sleep in???

Of course, we all know that school wasn't cancelled, we were just called to teach and learn in a new way. Ultimately, while it was difficult to get my brain shifted to a new way of thinking, I felt like I did an okay job of adapting to teaching online. I was able to connect with my students in a different way - through emails and Google Meetings, and I feel like I grew as a teacher in my ability to adapt, to be flexible, to learn new technology quickly!

While I remember the end of this school year forever, I will also remember the personal lessons I learned by slowing down. With three children who will be a 5th grader, a freshman, and a junior, our lives are usually on the go - piano lessons, games, clubs, practices, grocery shopping (constantly) - some weeks we might only be home together 1 or 2 nights! As I crossed off one event after another on our calendar, I really did mourn those losses. Of course, I would miss the golf meets, church services, the band/choir concerts, 8th grade promotion, VBS, and especially the family trip we were supposed to take in July. But I also realized that we had been given somewhat of a gift - an opportunity to slow down and focus on other things. Because Chelan and I both were able to keep working, we didn't have the worry that some might have faced. And I truly recognize this as a blessing!

I usually have some worry about the virus always lurking in the background, but I also felt like I witnessed spring unfolding before my eyes this year - and spring has always been a sign of hope for me (probably for most everyone). I planned and taught lessons outside, watched my garden change from earthy brown to a green space filled with life, although I also watched several of those plants shrivel up and die - a lesson in over-fertilizing! I walked several times a day, my usual time for talking with God, I watched squirrels scamper all over the place, and I became a new fan of birdwatching! I learned to recognize the calls of different birds as they flew about the backyard. I watched an Oriole build a strong, sturdy, basket nest in a tree right off of our deck, and right now, I am watching the mom and the dad take turns flying in to feed their new babies in that very nest. It is a remarkable thing to be able to slow down and take in God's creation, to marvel at the intricacies of each and every detail that He planned for. And while I watched the birds, the verses from Matthew 6 took hold:

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life[a]?"

The birds in my backyard have reminded me that God will also take care of me in all circumstances, and I have tried to remember to turn most of my worries over to Him. This time has allowed for that, and it is something I continue to work on!

So, as our calendar got emptier and emptier (in fact, we didn't even look at a calendar for 2 months), those cancelled events just kind of became normal, and I found that I was okay with that. Don't get me wrong, slowing down and staying home wasn't always amazing. Yet, I understand that Life probably isn't meant to be lived at such a fast pace. That those things I have thought to be so meaningful are really not meant to fill up all of our time! When those went away, life went on! Deep down, of course, I have known this, but to actually have slowed down and lived it has been a lesson I will remember for a long time. An empty calendar didn't really mean an empty schedule. It created space for a new one!

DELBERT PETERS

I am willing to share my experience with this pandemic, but first let me share some information leading up to this spring. For forty-two years I have been getting up at 6:30, driving to Hillsboro by 7:30, to prepare reports, get ready to help customers with invoices or employees with benefit issues. Most of my work was accounting, working with numbers, which I enjoyed. I had been working with a person for two years, who was hired to eventually take my place; so last fall I picked January 17 as a date when I would retire.

Since I knew I would retire in winter, Janine and I accepted a position on the MCC Sale Feeding the Multitude committee, which would give us some focus in April for an organization that we cherish. I enjoy following Goessel sports writing stories for a local newspaper, which I planned to continue. I was determined to get more exercise when I retired, and golfing is my choice for exercise. We were also anticipating a Prudent Tour, to do something together. It was often mentioned by those who had

retired, “Be careful in what you say Yes to, because you can get busier in retirement than when working.”

The retirement date came, and my employer hosted an event that was appreciated. I was approached with the task of picking up a grand daughter from pre-school. Would I be available? Well sure! I certainly was not too busy. Spending half a day with her was an unexpected pleasure that I had not planned for. I welcomed the task of setting up chairs and tables for Wednesday night meals. This was not a huge commitment. I attended Men’s coffee several times at Lincoln Perk, but what I found rewarding on those Monday mornings, was to go to several rooms at Bethesda and visit with some of our church members.

Well then Covid19 came along; no school, nursing homes locked down, and no church. So No sports to report on, No Bethesda visits, No midweek activities, No picking up grand daughter from preschool, NO MCC sale. No vacation to the Mississippi delta. Since golfing was outdoors, I continued to get my exercise in that way. Now I had a LOT of time on my hands.

Covid 19 was recognized to be most harmful to the oldest members of our communities. Anyone age 65 and older should be extra careful. Oh my, I am now in that category. So, wearing a face mask or staying six feet apart seems like a careful thing to do.

I gradually crossed off several home projects that needed to be done some day and I felt less guilty reading. I followed the sermon series by reading through the book of Job. I enjoy seeing birds at the bird feeder and discover bugs at the garden I have never noticed before.

What is God trying to tell me with this SUDDEN change of pace? When asked if I would be willing to send a note several times each month to two people who get few visits, I wondered, “Maybe this is how God might use me.” My role as Everence Advocate has allowed me to help secure some Matching Grants from Everence for people experiencing sudden loss of income. This feels rewarding. I want to stay curious to see what God might have in mind for me. One of the reasons I love Alexanderwohl, is there are so many people with different gifts. Experimenting with those spiritual gifts makes this a special place.

One lesson which I have learned since the virus hit, “God may be speaking to me in ways I did not recognize when I was so busy”. Slowing down allows for new discoveries. I feel that I have a spiritual gift of “Helps”. It seems that having a lot of time on my hands allows me to Help when someone needs an errand run, setting up chairs, doing some bookkeeping, sorting files or putting together shelves. I have done some tasks with a face mask and all of these tasks with social distancing in mind. I am sure that opportunities to help will continue to surface, and I hope to make regular stops at the MCC Center when volunteers are welcomed again.

The Lord willing, I will figure out what a normal retirement looks like. I knew I would have more free time, but Wow, this pandemic has given me a LOT of free time that I was not expecting.

BETH YODER

In a time of feeling disconnected from each other, I feel a bit of connection being able to share today, so I hope what I say has meaning for you as well.

The last 3 plus months have been a challenge for all of us. That challenge looks different in each of our lives. Those of us who are parents of young children sometimes long to have some quiet rest from our kids for a few hours. Others are tired of the quiet time and long for activity and interaction. Some of us have felt exhausted from the stress and work created by change, while others are ready for something new. The list of differences could go on and on, but each of our challenges are very real and hard, but I hope that during this time you have also experienced grace, generosity, and love.

From the time of shutdown until a couple of weeks ago, Caleb and I worked from home without childcare. Amidst a roller coaster of emotions, we were doing the bare minimum to stay afloat, and some days it felt like we weren't keeping our heads above water.

Through it all I kept telling myself things could be worse and I tried to practice gratitude. On hard days, I fell short even though somewhere deep down I was grateful.

I was grateful we both still had jobs, and jobs we could do from home at random hours of the day if needed.

I was grateful that I had Caleb; my heart ached many times for single parents.

I was grateful that our boys were home with us and healthy.

I was grateful that even though we weren't able to always get the groceries we wanted we had more than enough food to eat.

I was grateful that the shelves that were bare in the grocery store likely wouldn't be bare for long. My heart hurt for those in the world that have no idea when the shelves will have food again.

Through this time, I also had to remember to offer grace.

Grace to myself, knowing I could not realistically do as much as I was doing before.

Grace to others who seemed more irritable – we are all under stress.

Grace to the grocery worker who doesn't get a small part of my order right, after all I would not want their job right now and I am thankful I don't have to go in the grocery store.

I think the hardest one here was grace for myself, it's hard to not be able to do things the way you are used to or the way you want, but it was also positive for our household to be forced to make some changes.

In the times when I was able to focus on gratitude, questions of generosity also came to my mind. How can we be generous with those in need? A part of my mind says, but what if we later have needs, don't we need to be prepared? Even without Covid concerns we never know what tomorrow may bring. While it may not be bad to think about the uncertainty of the future, I am also reminded that God calls us to be generous and that there may be times when we will need to receive generosity.

I want to share 3 places that have given me cause to think about generosity recently:

- The first - In the most recent issue of WDC Garden, Heidi Regier Kreider, Conference Minister, shared some comments from those who have given to the WDC Hope Fund, a fund set up to help those in our conference who need assistance. The following quote struck me: a young-adult in Kansas wrote, "When I received my "stimulus" money, I wasn't sure about my own employment stability, but knew that, as we enter a time of economic instability, true security lies not in hoarding resources, but in nurturing a spirit of generosity. I give now because people have needs now and because I have money now. When I am in need, I put my trust in the continued generosity of the community of believers. This is mutual aid in a modern context."

I question if I have faith to give now because there is need now, and not hold tight because the future is uncertain?

- Second - And Mark 12:41-44 reads, "41 Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. 42 But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. 43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

If generosity in God's kingdom is measured not by the amount but by how much it cost me, what does that look like for me? Am I willing to trust and to give as this widow did?

- Lastly, I recently read an article that shared this quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *"I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that is it only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world. That, I think, is faith."*

Am I living unreservedly and completely, throwing myself into the arms of God, and taking seriously the sufferings of God in the world?

I don't have the answers to these questions. I offer them as thoughts to consider. I do know that I want to be generous. Ecclesiastes tells us there is a time and season for everything, if we aren't able to give financial resources perhaps we can give time or other resources, or perhaps this is a season to accept generosity. Whatever your circumstances, I hope that we can all find ways to continue on in hope and love.

BENEDICTION (SING THE JOURNEY #157)

Go into the world doing what the Lord requires: living with kindness and justice, walking your path humbly with God. Then you will find yourselves blessed. Know that yours is the kingdom of heaven, yours the strength and mercy of God, yours all the blessings given to God's beloved children.